

Syrup and Sympathy by onstraysod

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Summary:

Hopper and Eleven bond over the benefits of margarine and syrup and the importance of a simple word.

Syrup and Sympathy

Author's Note:

Special thanks to [supercomsandeggos](#) for the inspiration and for allowing me to take it and run with it!

It's funny, the way things seem to come back around in life, occurring and recurring like the spokes of some goddamn wheel of eternal return. It was only a couple of years back that a kid had caused him to smash in the front of the department's Blazer: that little idiot Todd Christiansen, stepping out from between two parked cars and right into the street without glancing in either direction like any preschooler of average intelligence would have known to do. Hopper had swerved aside to avoid him, ramming the Blazer straight into Jack Monroe's 1962 Impala, taking out one headlight, twisting up fender and grill, and buckling the hood like an accordion. The most taxing part of the whole affair had had nothing to do with the accident itself but with the small mountain of paperwork Hopper had been required to fill out in order to file an insurance claim, paperwork he'd been so loath to complete that Flo had finally been forced to take the most drastic of measures and had blocked the door of his own office on a Friday night until he'd finished it.

It might have been nothing more than a simple misunderstanding that had caused him to punch an insurance salesman in the mouth during an arrest a month or so later, but damn if it hadn't felt cathartic.

Now another kid was about to cause him to wreck the Blazer a second time, or at least come very close to doing so. But this kid was sitting shotgun and for most of the ride had been the most refreshingly quiet of passengers.

"You doing all right there?" Hopper asked, glancing at Eleven. She was sitting perfectly still, hands folded in her lap, head turning to look at everything that passed outside the windows, eyes round and limpid, soaking it all in. The first few times that she'd ridden in a car — with him or Jonathan Byers or the Wheelers - she'd resisted the

seat belt, recognizing it as a cousin to less innocuous instruments from her past. But Hopper had insisted and the last few times she'd buckled up willingly enough, the trade-off seeming to be her genuine enjoyment of going for rides. Everything from the different shapes and sizes of the houses to the traffic lights, to the way the shade of the trees that lined the roads sent shadows dappling across the dashboard, seemed to fascinate her. Lifting a hand she would trace the shape of those shadows with her finger on the glass, or stroke over the place where a cow appeared in a field as if she could pet the animal from afar and in passing.

These were just little random things Hopper had noticed that Eleven did; not that he'd really been paying attention. It was just that he'd been letting her ride along with him more often since the poor kid seemed to get a kick out of it and, hey, wasn't that part of a police chief's duties? Being an ambassador to the community, somebody the kids could come to with their problems?

Oh Jesus, what had he done?

Now brats like Todd Christiansen would be hassling him, wanting to talk about troubles at school or arguments with their parents or their *feelings*. But at least it had impelled him to start making these random patrols again. He'd neglected them for a few years or, if he had gone out, he'd ended up often enough at some grubby bar off the highway, drinking on duty. Taking Eleven along on these drives kept him from breaking that particular piece of protocol and he had no concern for her safety because it was Hawkins, after all: a stray dog wandering into someone's yard was likely to be the most exciting call they'd get.

Eleven turned to him now in response to his query and gave him one of her very small, faint smiles. "Yes."

"Okay then. We'll go a little further. I don't think you've been out this way before." Hopper extended a finger from the wheel, pointing out the windshield. "See that low line of hills over there? On the other side of those is the highway to Indianapolis. The big city. You'd be amazed--"

"STOP!"

It was fortunate there was no traffic on the road, for Hopper hit the brake so hard the tires squealed and the Blazer swerved slightly into the opposite lane.

“Jesus, Eleven!” he gasped, prying his fingers from the wheel: he had gripped it so hard he was surprised to find he hadn’t snapped it in two. “What the--”

“Eggo.”

She was leaning forward, hands braced against the dashboard, completely unaffected by their violent stop or Hopper’s raised voice. As he stared at her she raised one hand and pointed into the distance, towards a sign suspended high in the air: a sign comprised of yellow squares with blunt black lettering.

“A Waffle House?” Hopper said, his voice dripping with a sarcasm that was lost on Eleven. “That’s what you’re so worked up about?”

Eleven turned to him, eyes luminous. “Eggo.”

“Well not exactly...”

“Hungry.”

She uttered this in such a somber, serious tone that for a moment Hopper was almost deceived into a state of panic, imagining suddenly that he had neglected to feed her, as if she were a goldfish left forgotten in its bowl for a week.

“You can’t possibly be hungry,” he said, recovering himself enough to feel exasperation. “You had two cheeseburgers, fries, and a milkshake an hour ago.”

Eleven let his words pass over her without the slightest reaction. “Hungry.”

Hopper took a breath, contemplated arguing, then gave up, knowing that the argument would only be with himself anyway, and when had he ever won one of those? “Yeah, okay,” he said, easing down on the gas pedal and pulling the Blazer back into the right lane. “But just this once.”

The corners of Eleven's mouth jerked up so sharply, and her eyes glinted with such ferocity in the sunlight, that it was the closest to beaming Hopper had ever seen her come.

At three-fifteen in the afternoon the crowd at the Waffle House was pretty light. Eleven stood in the middle of the parking lot for a full minute before Hopper could get her to budge, staring in awe up at the word "WAFFLE" painted against the blue sky in letters as tall as herself and inhaling the slightly greasy scent rolling out of the exhaust vents. Once inside she made straight for a booth, sliding in, grabbing a menu, and completely ignoring the waitress who tried to make conversation.

"I'll have a cup of coffee, black," Hopper told the waitress.

"And what about you, sweetheart?"

Eleven planted a finger atop a picture of a very large stack of waffles. The waitress looked apprehensively at Hopper, who simply shrugged.

"Girl knows what she wants."

The waitress smiled. "Like father, like daughter, right?"

"Oh-- no, no, she's--" Hopper caught himself in the act of waving his hands, as if to reject Eleven. It felt wrong somehow, and it was too hard to explain anyway. "Yeah. Right."

Eleven hadn't noticed his distress; she was too busy gazing around the restaurant and out the window they sat beside, at the pigeons landing on the asphalt of the parking lot and the crows circling the cornfield beyond. Hopper sipped at his coffee when it came, watching her as unobtrusively as possible. Her hair was beginning to grow back, dark and shiny, just long enough to hold a silver barrette on one side. She was dressed in a striped sweater and jeans, hand-me-downs from Nancy Wheeler, and one might pass her by on the street, thinking she was a normal child on the edge of adolescence, a girl whose worries were confined to shades of lip gloss and whether or not the boy she liked liked her in return.

Then again, if anyone saw the way she attacked the stack of waffles

that was soon placed before her, they might guess - as Hopper knew - that this was no ordinary child.

Eleven didn't pick up her fork; in fact, she left it wrapped in the paper napkin beside the plate. Instead, and with no preliminaries, she simply picked up the top waffle and began gnawing.

"Whoa! Whoa, hold up kid!" Hopper cried, and Eleven froze, eyes enormous and fixed on his face. "That's not how you eat waffles."

"Not?" Eleven seemed crestfallen.

"No, you-- Look." Hopper set his cup of coffee aside and reached for Eleven's plate. She made a grab for it, sitting up straighter like a lioness ready to defend her kill from an interloping hyena. Hopper held up both hands. "I'm not going to take it away from you. I just want you to try something, okay?" Eleven let go of the plate and watched Hopper, still wary, as he took one of the little packages of margarine the waitress had brought with the waffles and opened it. He picked up a knife and spread the margarine on top of the uppermost waffle slowly, glancing at Eleven and trying his hardest not to laugh at her look of horror.

"Just try it on one, for me, okay? If you don't like it, you can eat the rest plain." Then he took up the bottle of maple syrup and poured about a tablespoon's worth on the top waffle, the honey-brown liquid flooding the patchwork of squares in its surface. Eleven appeared deeply troubled.

"Go on, give it a try," Hopper said, grinning. "I guarantee, kid, this is going to knock your socks off."

Hesitantly, Eleven laid aside the half-eaten plain waffle and started to pick up the one coated in margarine and syrup. "With the fork!" Hopper cried, unwrapping it and sticking it in her hand. "Unless you want to get it all over your sweater."

Adjusting the handle of the fork against her palm, Eleven cut a messy triangle out of the waffle and slowly raised it to her mouth. Hopper watched intently as Eleven got her first taste of the syrup. It was easy to tell when it hit: she went very still but her eyes rounded like twin

moons and met Hopper's gaze in silent astonishment.

"Huh, right? What did I tell you?"

Eleven returned Hopper's grin around the waffle before hurriedly snatching the syrup bottle and flooding the remaining stack. "Okay, well, usually the butter goes on first, but that works too," Hopper said, watching her.

Eleven squirmed happily in her seat as she devoured one forkful after another. Then, suddenly, she set down her fork to take a drink of water and said, smiling at Hopper: "Friends."

The word caught Hopper so off his guard that for a moment he could do nothing but stare at her, as if she had just spoken in an incomprehensible language of her own creation. Eleven paused, her fingers curling around the handle of her fork again, suddenly apprehensive. "Friends?"

This time it was a question. Hopper realized that his mouth was hanging open and he quickly closed it, rousing himself.

"You and me, you mean?" Eleven nodded slowly. "Y-yeah. Yeah. Of course we are. Friends."

Eleven smiled and went back to eating while Hopper wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, stupefied. But why not, he asked himself. What else could she call him? What had he expected?

He felt the unwelcome burning, the one he had spent over four years drinking to dull, the one he had deadened with pills and booze and mindless, loveless pleasure with a string of women whose names he could no longer remember. He swallowed, his throat tightening the familiar way, and he stared out the window, concentrating all his mind and being on a single fence post in the cornfield behind the restaurant, staring at it as if his life depended upon it — because it did or, if not his life, at least his dignity. He stared and stared, willing it away, the sting, the knot, the upsurge of all he'd tried to destroy by destroying himself — but it was no good, it never really was, it came on, ineluctable as the dawn.

“Sad.”

Hopper was running the pad of his thumb along the ridge of bone beneath his left eye, catching the moisture there just as Eleven spoke. “What?”

There was panic in her eyes, the startled clarity that something was suddenly wrong. “Sad.”

As Hopper looked at her, Eleven’s bottom lip began to tremble and her index finger curled inward, towards her chest. He shook his head.

“No, no. You didn’t do anything wrong. Look at me, Eleven,” he continued, his voice sterner, commanding, as he noticed the fear spring up, wild and feverish, in her gaze. “You didn’t make me sad. This--” he shook his head, gesturing vaguely at his face, “this is not about you.”

“Sad,” Eleven insisted again, though more calmly now. As she watched Hopper she suddenly added: “Why?”

Hopper drew in a deep breath, then blew it out, long and low, staring at the dregs of the coffee in his cup. Time seemed to slow, to swallow him up, and all the world fell away, leaving him and Eleven and the booth and the remnants of the waffles on her plate alone in a miniature world, untethered from the rest of reality. Many people had asked him, pressed him to speak of it: if not outright with words then they asked with their sorrowful eyes, their mawkish expressions. Hopper had always resented it: it was the same lurid curiosity that made motorists slow down as they passed the twisted wreckage of a car crash, that made them crane their necks and gawk at the stretchers being loaded into ambulances. He’d heard people say that it honored the departed, to speak of them, but that was bullshit: all people really wanted to hear about was the death and surely everybody was more than how they died? He would never reduce her down to that.

But Eleven-- Those wide, fiercely intelligent eyes weren’t asking out of morbid curiosity. They weren’t asking about her at all, but about him. And there was only one way to explain his fractured heart, the sorrow that she keenly discerned rising and falling beneath his

weathered surface. He could evade and lie to anyone else's face - anyone. But not Eleven. She demanded truth and she would have it.

"I, uh-- I had a daughter." He glanced up at Eleven, saw her eyes widen just that millimeter more at this revelation. "She'd be a year or two younger than you now, if she'd lived. But she died." He'd started fingering the bracelet as he spoke, not intentionally, not even realizing that he was doing so. "And I miss her."

There was silence then, as the memories washed over him and he concentrated on just breathing through them, not panicking because the tone of her voice had become a little less distinct or because he couldn't quite recall the tint of her hair. He didn't reach for the pill bottle - that was an improvement - just tightened the grip on his cup.

"Hopper?"

He glanced up to see Eleven gazing at him, eyes wet with tears for a little girl whose existence she hadn't known of until that moment. "I'm sorry."

He marveled later at how he made it through that moment. "Thank you, Eleven." He nodded at her plate. "Go on, finish your waffles."

She poked at them, managed to get a few more bites down, but either her joyful appetite had abandoned her or - perhaps more plausibly - there simply wasn't room enough in her stomach for an entire stack of waffles on top of two cheeseburgers. She drank down the rest of her water, Hopper paid the bill, and they walked back outside to the Blazer, the faded paint a dull bronze in the late afternoon sun.

He was whistling, some stupid new song he'd heard on the radio that morning. He'd gotten good, over the past four years, at these little diversionary tactics - jokes and smirks and *hey there, how're ya's* - the plates in his armor. And then he felt something so strange, so unexpected, that it halted his steps, took his breath away.

Eleven had put her hand in his.

Her slender fingers gripped his gently and she looked up at him, as if to ask if that was all right.

Hopper squeezed her hand softly and smiled at her. "Friends," he said simply.

She let go to climb into the Blazer. As Hopper pulled out of the parking lot the sun slanted sharply through the windshield and he caught sight of Eleven out of the corner of his eye: the bright stripes of her sweater, the glint of her silver barrette. It was almost easy to believe, for just one moment...

But no. It would never be the same. And yet, in some small way, it was enough.

Funny how things in life seem to come back around.